

V Corps framework for new command, NATO mission in Afghanistan

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KABUL, Afghanistan -- In June, V Corps was one month away from casing its colors in compliance with an Army directive to deactivate.



U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO

V Corps Soldiers put up sheets of plywood on several of the wooden huts lining Afghanistan's North Kabul Area International Airport. Corps Soldiers teamed with U.S. Air Force engineers and locally contracted workers to build many of the new facilities on the compound where IJC operates.

Six months, later nearly 180 V Corps Soldiers deployed from the corps headquarters in Heidelberg, Germany have laid the foundation for a new NATO command that oversees all day-to-day military operations in Afghanistan.

Headquartered at Kabul Area International Airport, V Corps is the framework organization for the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command that took control of NATO's five regional headquarters in Afghanistan Oct. 12, giving it a firm grasp on all tactical ground operations planned and executed in theater.

Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez, IJC commander, told a NATO military committee in October that IJC eased the burden placed on Afghanistan's top command, the International Security Assistance Force headquarters, located just a few miles down the road in Kabul.

Rodriguez said a renewed effort in Afghanistan and the unwieldy scale of operations ISAF took on were the catalyst for altering the command structure of the NATO led mission.

"ISAF was working with the smallest tactical engagement in any place in Afghanistan, all the way up to working the partnership with the minister of interior and minister of defense... we needed to get (ISAF) on a higher plain to work on the national piece," he told the NATO military committee.

ISAF has shifted its focus to working with Afghan and other international organizations in the country and limited its scope and scale on the tactical aspect of the war. This leaves V Corps

Soldiers and IJC as the link between the tactical operations on the ground and Gen. Stanley McChrystal's four-star ISAF command.

V Corps has gone a long way in just a short time, said Lt. Col. John Demko, the Future Operations Cross Functional Team executive officer for IJC and a former plans officer for U.S. Army Europe.

In June, before receiving official approval of ISAF's restructuring from NATO allies, the Pentagon tapped V Corps to be the founding organization of the conceptualized IJC.

The unit was expected to deploy to the Afghan capital on only a few months notice and "build a headquarters capable of operating at full capacity by early October," said Demko. "We knew establishing a nonexistent command was going to be a challenge. We were building the airplane in flight," he said.

On June 3, Demko met with Col. Michael Everett, IJC Future Operations Cross Functional Team officer in charge and former USAREUR chief of plans, and Everett explained what only a few outside of the Pentagon knew, the talk of a new three star command to support NATO's mission in Afghanistan and plans to scrap the V Corps deactivation.

After receiving the official word in June from Gen. Carter F. Ham, U.S. Army Europe commander, the corps readied for deployment.

As is the case with many USAREUR units before deployment, V Corps Soldiers honed their warrior skills during a five-day Theater Specific Training course at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany.

Corps Soldiers attended weekly classes on Afghanistan's terrain and culture and were privy to intelligence updates on the country's current military ground operations.



U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO

Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez, commander of the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command (foreground middle), joins IJC and V Corps personnel for a group photo in the Combined-Joint Operations Center after reaching full operating capability, Nov 12. Full operating capability gives the command complete control and oversight on all military operations in Afghanistan.

Every couple of weeks starting in late August, platoon-sized elements of corps Soldiers began deploying to Kabul. Within six weeks of arrival, the team had literally built the command from the ground up, said Demko, and established initial operating capability; the IJC reached full operating capability Nov. 12.

Working from an airfield bounded by mountains and speckled with only a few hardened shelters, the corps quickly went to work, "transforming the Kabul Area

International Airport into the new home for (IJC)," said Demko.

The IJC Combined –Joint Operations Center was a gymnasium before becoming the information hub for the military operations in Afghanistan. Brick and mortar buildings and a few wooden huts now line the northern compound of the airport.

Corps Soldiers, along with the U.S. Air Force’s Team Red Horse engineer unit and locally contracted workers, completed construction of the IJC compound in early October. The command had complete oversight on all military operations soon after, Demko said.

Everett, Demko and a team of military planners brought together more than 40 nations, including all 28 NATO members, scattered throughout Kabul to staff the headquarters creating a balanced representation of US and NATO personnel.

Going forward with the NATO-led mission, Demko said the three-star headquarters “really is a multi-national effort,” and feels the headquarters and V Corps Soldiers continue to improve.

“Every day we are noticeably better than the day before,” he said. “The collective intelligence is better every day.”

He said he believes both, ISAF and the IJC’s success in Afghanistan are interlinked.

“We can have hundreds of victories at the operational and tactical level, but without some sort of strategy and work on corruption, national and sub-national governance as well as development, our work could be futile,” Demko said, explaining ISAF’s new role in the NATO mission. “We need ISAF to succeed as much as they need us to succeed.

We understand the time is now to make a difference in (Afghanistan),” he said. So look for V Corps to be around for the long haul, he added.